# Military history of African Americans

The **military history of African Americans** spans from the arrival of the first enslaved Africans during the colonial history of the United States to the present day. In every war fought by or within the United States, African Americans participated, including the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Mexican–American War, the Civil War, the Spanish–American War, the World Wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as other minor conflicts.

Tuskegee Airmen of the 332nd Fighter Group, United States Army Air Forces (USAAF), attend a briefing at Ramitelli Airfield, Italy in March 1945.

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# Revolutionary War

Crispus Attucks was an iconic patriot; engaging in a protest in 1770, he was shot by royal soldiers in the Boston Massacre.

African Americans as slaves and free blacks served on both sides during the war. Gary Nash reports that recent research concludes there were about 9,000 black Patriot soldiers, counting the Continental Army and Navy, and state militia units, as well as privateers, wagoneers in the Army, servants to officers, and spies.[1] Ray Raphael notes that while thousands did join the Loyalist cause, "A far larger number, free as well as slave, tried to further their interests by siding with the patriots."[2]

Black soldiers served in Northern militias from the outset, but this was forbidden in the South, where slave-owners feared arming slaves. Lord Dunmore, the Royal Governor of Virginia, issued an emancipation proclamation in November 1775, promising freedom to runaway slaves who fought for the British; Sir Henry Clinton issued a similar edict in New York in 1779.[3] Over 100,000 slaves escaped to the British lines, although possibly as few as 1,000 served under arms. Many of the rest served as orderlies, mechanics, laborers, servants, scouts and guides, although more than half died in smallpox epidemics that swept the British forces, and many were driven out of the British lines when food ran low. Despite Dunmore's promises, the majority were not given their freedom. Many Black Loyalists' descendants now live in Canada and Sierra Leone. Many of the Black Loyalists performed military service in the British Army, particularly as part of the only Black regiment of the war, the Black Pioneers, and others served non-military roles.

In response, and because of manpower shortages, Washington lifted the ban on black enlistment in the Continental Army in January 1776. All-black units were formed in Rhode Island and Massachusetts; many were slaves promised freedom for serving in lieu of their masters; another all-African-American unit came from Haiti with French forces. At least 5,000 African-American soldiers fought as Revolutionaries, and at least 20,000 served with the British.

Peter Salem and Salem Poor are the most noted of the African-American Patriots during this era, and Colonel Tye was perhaps the most noteworthy Black Loyalist.

Black volunteers also served with various of the South Carolina guerrilla units, including that of the "Swamp Fox", Francis Marion,[4] half of whose force sometimes consisted of free Blacks. These Black troops made a critical difference in the fighting in the swamps, and kept Marion's guerrillas effective even when many of his White troops were down with malaria or yellow fever.

The first black American to fight in the Marines was John Martin, also known as Keto, the slave of a Delaware man, recruited in April 1776 without his owner's permission by Captain of the Marines Miles Pennington of the Continental brig USS *Reprisal*. Martin served with the Marine platoon on the *Reprisal* for a year and a half and took part in many ship-to-ship battles including boardings with hand-to-hand combat, but he was lost with the rest of his unit when the brig sank in October 1777.[5] At least 12 other black men served with various American Marine units in 1776–1777; more may have been in service but not identified as blacks in the records. However, in 1798 when the United States Marine Corps (USMC) was officially re-instituted, Secretary of War James McHenry specified in its rules: "No Negro, Mulatto or Indian to be enlisted".[5] Marine Commandant William Ward Burrows instructed his recruiters regarding USMC racial policy, "You can make use of Blacks and Mulattoes while you recruit,

but you cannot enlist them."[5] This policy was in line with long-standing British naval practice which set a higher standard of unit cohesion for Marines, the unit to be made up of only one race, so that the members would remain loyal, maintain shipboard discipline and help put down mutinies.[5] The USMC maintained this policy until 1942.[6][7]

# War of 1812

During the War of 1812, about one-quarter of the personnel in the American naval squadrons of the Battle of Lake Erie were black, and portrait renderings of the battle on the wall of the nation's Capitol and the rotunda of Ohio's Capitol show that blacks played a significant role in it. Hannibal Collins, a freed slave and Oliver Hazard Perry's personal servant, is thought to be the oarsman in William Henry Powell's *Battle of Lake Erie*.[9] Collins earned his freedom as a veteran of the Revolutionary War, having fought in the Battle of Rhode Island. He accompanied Perry for the rest of Perry's naval career, and was with him at Perry's death in Trinidad in 1819.[10]

Painting of Battle of Lake Erie depicting one of Perry's African-American oarsmen in the boat and another African-American sailor in the water[8]

No legal restrictions regarding the enlistment of blacks were placed on the Navy because of its chronic shortage of manpower. The law of 1792, which generally prohibited enlistment of blacks in the Army became the United States Army's official policy until 1862. The only exception to this Army policy was Louisiana, which gained an exemption at the time of its purchase through a treaty provision, which allowed it to opt out of the operation of any law, which ran counter to its traditions and customs. Louisiana permitted the existence of separate black militia units which drew its enlistees from freed blacks.

A militia unit, The Louisiana Battalion of Free Men of Color, and a unit of black soldiers from Santo Domingo offered their services and were accepted by General Andrew Jackson in the Battle of New Orleans, a victory that was achieved after the war was officially over.[11]

Blacks fought at the Battle of Bladensburg 24 August 1814, many as members of Commodore Joshua Barney's naval flotilla force. This force provided crucial artillery support during the battle. One of the best accounts is that Charles Ball born 1785. Ball served with Commodore Joshua at the Battle of Bladensburg and later helped man the defenses at Baltimore. In his 1837 memoir, Ball reflected on the Battle of Bladensburg: "I stood at my gun, until the Commodore was shot down… if the militia regiments, that lay upon our right and left, cold have been brought to charge the British, in close fight, as they crossed the bridge, we should have killed or taken the whole of them in a short time; but the militia ran like sheep chased by dogs."[12] Barney's flotilla group included numerous African Americans who provided artillery support during the battle. Modern scholars estimate blacks made up between 15–20%, of the American naval forces in the War of 1812.[13]

Just before the battle Commodore Barney on being asked by President James Madison "if his negroes would not run on the approach of the British?" replied: "No Sir…they don't know how to run; they will die by their guns first."[14] The Commodore was correct, the men did not run, one such man was young sailor Harry Jones (no.35), apparently a free black. Harry Jones was wounded in the final action at Bladensburg. Due to the severity of Jones wounds, he remained a patient at the Naval Hospital Washington DC for nearly two months.[15]

African Americans also served with the British. On April 2, 1814, Vice Admiral Alexander Cochrane issued a proclamation to all persons wishing to emigrate, similar to the aforementioned Dunmore's Proclamantion some 40 years previous. Any persons would be received by the British, either at a military outpost or aboard British ships; those seeking sanctuary could enter His Majesty's forces, or go "as free settlers to the British possessions in North America or the West Indies".[16][17][18] Among those who went to the British, some joined the Corps of Colonial Marines, an auxiliary unit of marine infantry, embodied on May 14, 1814. British commanders later stated the new marines fought well at Bladensburg and confirm that two companies took part in

the burning of Washington including the White House. Following the Treaty of Ghent, the British kept their promise and in 1815 evacuated the Colonial Marines and their families to Halifax Canada and Bermuda.[19]

African-American seaman Harry Jones is enumerated patient no. 35 on this 1814 Register of Patients, Naval Hospital Washington. Register states "Harry Jones black boy wound Bladensburg". "Boy", in this context, was a reference to rank. Boys in early navy were simply young sailors in training aged 12 to 18.

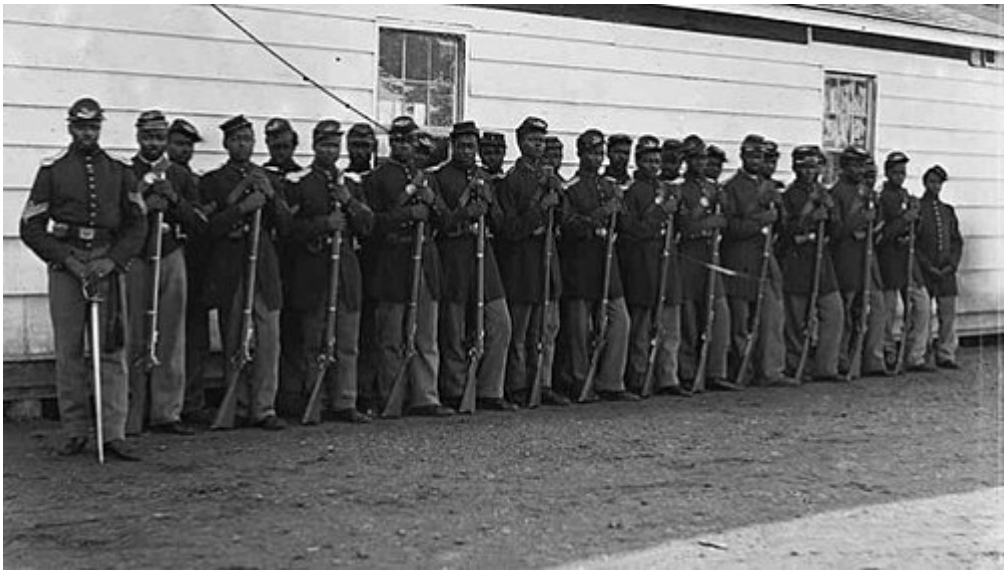
## 1815 to 1840

From the Treaty of Ghent to the Mexican-American War, African Americans made up a significant part of the peacetime navy. Data for 1839 was collected by Commodore Lewis Warrington and forwarded to the Secretary of the Navy as a memorandum with the number of recruits from 1 September 1838 to September 17, 1839. This document provides data for five naval recruiting stations which in total reflect 1016 men entered or naval service, "of which 122 were Black" or 12% of the total.[20]

## Mexican–American War

A number of African Americans in the Army during the Mexican–American War were servants of the officers who received government compensation for the services of their servants or slaves. Also, soldiers from the Louisiana Battalion of Free Men of Color participated in this war. African Americans also served on a number of naval vessels during the Mexican–American War, including the USS *Treasure*, and the USS *Columbus*.[11]

## American Civil War



Company I of the 36th Colored Regiment.USCT

The history of African Americans in the U.S. Civil War is marked by 186,097 (7,122 officers, 178,975 enlisted)[21] African-American men, comprising 163 units, who served in the Union Army during the Civil War, and many more African Americans served in the Union Navy. Both free African Americans and runaway slaves joined the fight.

On the Confederate side, blacks, both free and slave, were used for labor. In the final months of the war, the Confederate Army was desperate for additional soldiers so the Confederate Congress voted to recruit black troops for combat; they were to be promised their freedom. Units were in training when the war ended, and none served in combat.[22]

- 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment

# Indian Wars

From 1863 to the early 20th century, African-American units were utilized by the Army to combat the Native Americans during the Indian Wars.[23] The most noted among this group were the Buffalo Soldiers:

- 9th Cavalry Regiment
- 10th Cavalry Regiment
- 24th Infantry Regiment
- 25th Infantry Regiment

Buffalo Soldiers of the 25th Infantry Regiment, 1890

At the end of the U.S. Civil War the army reorganized and authorized the formation of two regiments of black cavalry (the 9th and 10th US Cavalry). Four regiments of infantry (the 38th, 39th, 40th and 41st US Infantry) were formed at the same time. In 1869, the four infantry regiments were merged into two new ones (the 24th and 25th US Infantry). These units were composed of black enlisted men commanded by white officers such as Benjamin Grierson, and occasionally, an African-American officer such as Henry O. Flipper. The "Buffalo Soldiers" served a variety of roles along the frontier from building roads to guarding the U.S. mail.[24]

These regiments served at a variety of posts in the southwest United States and Great Plains regions. During this period they participated in most of the military campaigns in these areas and earned a distinguished record. Thirteen enlisted men and six officers from these four regiments earned the Medal of Honor during the Indian Wars.[25]

# Spanish–American War

After the Indian Wars ended in the 1890s, the regiments continued to serve and participated in the Spanish–American War (including the Battle of San Juan Hill), where five more Medals of Honor were earned.[26] They took part in the 1916 Punitive Expedition into Mexico and in the Philippine–American War.

Segregated company during the Spanish–American War; Camp Wikoff 1898

## Units

In addition to the African Americans who served in regular army units during the Spanish–American War, five African-American Volunteer Army units and seven African-American National Guard units served.

Volunteer Army:

- 7th United States Volunteer Infantry (Colored Troops)
- 8th United States Volunteer Infantry (Colored Troops)
- 9th United States Volunteer Infantry (Colored Troops)
- 10th United States Volunteer Infantry (Colored Troops)
- 11th United States Volunteer Infantry (Colored Troops)

Tenth Dragoons exercise in Cuba

National Guard:

- 3rd Alabama Volunteer Infantry (Colored Troops)
- 8th Illinois Volunteer Infantry (Colored Troops)[27]
- Companies A and B, 1st Indiana Volunteer Infantry (Colored Troops)
- 23rd Kansas Volunteer Infantry (Colored Troops)
- 3rd North Carolina Volunteer Infantry (Colored Troops)

- 9th Ohio Volunteer Infantry (Colored Troops)
- 6th Virginia Volunteer Infantry (Colored Troops)

Of these units, only the 9th U.S., 8th Illinois, and 23rd Kansas served outside the United States during the war. All three units served in Cuba and suffered no losses to combat.

# Philippine-American War

After the Treaty of Paris, the islands of the Philippines became a colony of the United States. When the U.S. military started to send soldiers into the islands, native rebels, who had already been fighting their former Spanish rulers, opposed U.S. colonization and retaliated, causing an insurrection. In what would be known as the Philippine-American War, the U.S. military also sent colored regiments and units to stop the insurrection. However, due to the discrimination of African-American soldiers, some of them defected to the Philippine Army.

One of those that defected was David Fagen, who was given the rank of captain in the Philippine Army. Fagen served in the 24th Regiment of the U.S. Army, but on November 17, 1899,[28] he defected to the Filipino army.[29] He became a successful guerrilla leader and his capture became an obsession to the U.S. military and American public. His defection was likely the result of differential treatment by American occupational forces toward black soldiers, as well as common American forces derogatory treatment and views of the Filipino occupational resistance, who were frequently referred to as "niggers" and "gugus".[30]

After two other black deserters were captured and executed, President Theodore Roosevelt announced he would stop executing captured deserters.[31] As the war ended, the US gave amnesties to most of their opponents. A substantial reward was offered for Fagen, who was considered a traitor. There are two conflicting versions of his fate: one is that his was the partially decomposed head for which the reward was claimed, the other is that he took a local wife and lived peacefully in the mountains.[32]

# World War I

The U.S. armed forces remained segregated through World War I. Still, many African Americans volunteered to join the Allied cause following America's entry into the war. By the time of the armistice with Germany on November 11, 1918, over 350,000 African Americans had served with the American Expeditionary Force on the Western Front.[33]

Officers of the 366th Infantry Regiment returning home from World War I service.

Most African-American units were largely relegated to support roles and did not see combat. Still, African Americans played a notable role in America's war effort. For example, the 369th Infantry Regiment, known as the "Harlem Hellfighters", was assigned to the French Army and served on the front lines for six months. 171 members of the 369th were awarded the Legion of Merit.

Corporal Freddie Stowers of the 371st Infantry Regiment that was seconded to the 157th French Army division called the Red Hand Division in need of reinforcement under the command of the General Mariano Goybet was posthumously awarded a Medal of Honor[34]—the only African American to be so honored for actions in World War I. During action in France, Stowers had led an assault on German trenches, continuing to lead and encourage his men even after being twice wounded. Stowers died from his wounds, but his men continued the fight and eventually defeated the German troops. Stowers was recommended for the Medal of Honor shortly after his death, but the nomination was, according to the Army, misplaced. In 1990, under pressure from Congress, the Department of the Army launched an investigation. Based on findings from this investigation, the Army Decorations Board approved the award of the Medal of Honor to Stowers. On April 24, 1991–73 years after he was killed in action—Stowers' two surviving sisters received the Medal of Honor from President George H. W. Bush at the White House. The success of the investigation leading to

Stowers' Medal of Honor later sparked a similar review that resulted in six African Americans being posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for actions in World War II. Vernon Baker was the only recipient who was still alive to receive his award.[35]

Soldiers of the 369th (15th N.Y.) who won the Croix de Guerre for gallantry in action, 1919

### Units

Some of the most notable African-American units that served in World War I were:

- 92nd Infantry Division[36]
  - 366th Infantry Regiment
- 93rd Infantry Division
  - 369th Infantry Regiment ("Harlem Hellfighters"; formerly the 15th New York National Guard)
  - 370th Infantry Regiment (formerly the 8th Illinois)[37][38]
  - 371st Infantry Regiment
  - 372nd Infantry Regiment

351st Field Artillery troops on the deck of the *Louisville*

Support units included:

- Butchery Companies, Nos. 322 and 363
- Stevedore Regiments, Nos. 301, 302 and 303d Stevedore Regiment and Stevedore Battalions, Nos. 701, 702
- Engineer Service Battalions, Nos. 505 to 550, inclusive
- Labor Battalions, Nos. 304 to 315, inclusive; Nos. 317 to 327, inclusive; Nos. 329 to 348, inclusive, and No. 357
- Labor Companies, Nos. 301 to 324, inclusive
- Pioneer Infantry Battalions, Nos. 801 to 809, inclusive; No. 811 and Nos. 813 to 816, inclusive.[39]

A complete list of African-American units that served in the war is published in the book *Willing Patriots: Men of Color in World War One*. The book is cited in the "Further reading" section of this article.

African Americans Veterans faced heavy persecution when they returned home from World War I and many African American veterans were lynched after returning from WWI.

# Period between the world wars

Even though the U.S. government was nominally neutral in the wars waged by Fascists against Ethiopia and Fascists and Nazis against the Spanish Republic in the mid-1930s, African Americans found it hard to be neutral and many became Antifascist.[40]

### Second Italo-Abyssinian War

On October 4, 1935, Fascist Italy invaded Ethiopia. Being the only non-colonized African country besides Liberia, the invasion of Ethiopia caused a profound response amongst African Americans.[41] African Americans organized to raise money for medical supplies, and many volunteered to fight for the African kingdom.[42] Within eight months, however, Ethiopia was overpowered by the advanced weaponry and mustard gas of the Italian forces.

Many years later Haile Selassie I would comment on the efforts: "We can never forget the help Ethiopia received from Negro Americans during the crisis. ... It moved me to know that Americans of African descent did not abandon their embattled brothers, but stood by us."[42]

### Spanish Civil War

When General Franco rebelled against the newly established secular Spanish Republic, a number of African Americans volunteered to fight for Republican Spain. Many African Americans who were in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade had Communist ideals. Among these, there was Vaughn Love who went to fight for the Spanish loyalist cause because he considered Fascism to be the "enemy of all black aspirations."

African-American activist and World War I veteran Oliver Law, fighting in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade during the Spanish Civil War[43]

James Peck was an African-American man from Pennsylvania who was turned down when he applied to become a military pilot in the US. He then went on to serve in the Spanish Republican Air Force until 1938.[44] Peck was credited with shooting down five Aviación Nacional planes, two Heinkel He-51s from the Legion Condor and three Fiat CR.32 Fascist Italian fighters.

Salaria Kea was a young African-American nurse from Harlem Hospital who served as a military nurse with the American Medical Bureau in the Spanish Civil War. She was one of the two only African-American female volunteers in the midst of the war-torn Spanish Republican areas.[45] When Salaria came back from Spain she wrote the pamphlet "A Negro Nurse in Spain" and tried to raise funds for the beleaguered Spanish Republic.[46]

## World War II

> We call upon the president and congress to declare war on Japan and racial prejudice in our country. Certainly we should be strong enough to whip them both.
>
> The *Pittsburgh Courier*[47]

Despite a high enlistment rate in the U.S. Army, African Americans were not treated equally. At parades, church services, in transportation and canteens the races were kept separate. A quota of only 48 nurses was set for African-American women, and the women were segregated from white nurses and white soldiers for much of the war. Eventually more black nurses enlisted. They were assigned to care for black soldiers. Black nurses were integrated into everyday life with their white colleagues.

The first African-American woman sworn into the Navy Nurse Corps was Phyllis Mae Dailey, a Columbia University student from New York. She was the first of only four African-American women to serve as a Navy nurse during World War II.[48]

Phyllis Mae Dailey was sworn into the United States Navy Nurse Corps as the first African-American servicewoman in World War II.

Many soldiers of color served their country with distinction during World War II. There were 125,000 African Americans who were overseas in World War II. Famous segregated units, such as the Tuskegee Airmen and 761st Tank Battalion and the lesser-known but equally distinguished 452nd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion,[49] proved their value in combat, leading to desegregation of all U.S. armed forces by order of President Harry S. Truman in July 1948 via Executive Order 9981.

Battery A of the 452nd AAA Battalion, November 9, 1944

Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. served as commander of the Tuskegee Airmen during the war. He later went on to become the first African-American general in the United States Air Force. His father, Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., had been the first African-American brigadier general in the Army (1940).

Doris Miller, a Navy mess attendant, was the first African-American recipient of the Navy Cross, awarded for his actions during the attack on Pearl Harbor. Miller had voluntarily manned an anti-aircraft gun and fired at the Japanese aircraft, despite having no prior training in the weapon's use.


Admiral Chester W. Nimitz pins Navy Cross on Doris Miller, at ceremony on board warship in Pearl Harbor, May 27, 1942

In 1944, the Golden Thirteen became the Navy's first African-American commissioned officers. Samuel L. Gravely, Jr. became a commissioned officer the same year; he would later be the first African American to command a US warship, and the first to be an admiral.

The Port Chicago disaster on July 17, 1944, was an explosion of about 2,000 tons of ammunition as it was being loaded onto ships by black Navy sailors under pressure from their white officers to hurry. The explosion in Northern California killed 320 military and civilian workers, most of them black. It led a month later to the Port Chicago Mutiny, the only case of a full military trial for mutiny in the history of the U.S. Navy against 50 African-American sailors who refused to continue loading ammunition under the same dangerous conditions. The trial was observed by the then young lawyer Thurgood Marshall and ended in conviction of all of the defendants. The trial was immediately and later criticized for not abiding by the applicable laws on mutiny, and it became influential in the discussion of desegregation.

During World War II, African-American soldiers served in all fields of service. In the midst of the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944, General Eisenhower was severely short of replacement troops for existing all-white companies. Consequently, he made the decision to allow 2000 black servicemen volunteers to serve in segregated platoons under the command of white lieutenants to replenish these companies.[50] These platoons would serve with distinction and, according to an Army survey in the summer of 1945, 84% were ranked "very well" and 16% were ranked "fairly well". No black platoon received a ranking of "poor" by those white officers or white soldiers that fought with them. These platoons were often subject to racist treatment by white military units in occupied Germany and were quickly sent back to their old segregated units after the end of hostilities in Germany. Despite their protests, these brave African-American soldiers ended the war in their old non-combat service units. Though largely forgotten after the war, the temporary experiment with black combat troops proved a success - a small, but important step toward permanent integration during the Korean War.[51][52] A total of 708 African Americans were killed in combat during World War II.[53]

In 1945, Frederick C. Branch became the first African-American United States Marine Corps officer.

A blue plaque commemorating the contribution of African-American soldiers based in Wales during World War II was installed by the Nubian Jak Community Trust at RAF Carew Cheriton on the 75th anniversary of the D-Day landings, June 6, 2019.[54][55][56]

## Units

**Army:**

- 92nd Infantry Division
  - 366th Infantry Regiment
  - 370th Infantry Regiment
- 93rd Infantry Division
  - 369th Infantry Regiment
  - 371st Infantry Regiment
- 2nd Cavalry Division
  - 4th Cavalry Brigade
    - 10th Cavalry Regiment
    - 27th Cavalry Regiment[58]
  - 5th Cavalry Brigade
    - 9th Cavalry Regiment
    - 28th Cavalry Regiment[58][59][60]
- Non Divisional Units
  - Barrage Balloon Unit
    - 320th Barrage Balloon Battalion
  - Anti-Aircraft Artillery Unit
    - 452nd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion
  - Infantry Units
    - 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion
  - Cavalry/Armor Units
    - US Military Academy Cavalry Squadron
    - 5th Reconnaissance Squadron
    - 758th Tank Battalion

The Tuskegee Airmen were the first African-American pilots in United States military history; they flew with distinction during World War II. Portrait of Tuskegee airman Edward M. Thomas by photographer Toni Frissell, March 1945.

- 761st Tank Battalion
- 784th Tank Battalion

- Field Artillery Units
  - 46th Field Artillery Brigade.[61]
  - 184th Field Artillery Regiment, Illinois National Guard.
  - 333rd Field Artillery Regiment.[62]
  - 349th Field Artillery Regiment[63]
  - 350th Field Artillery Regiment[64]
  - 351st Field Artillery Regiment[65]
  - 353rd Field Artillery Regiment[66]
  - 578th Field Artillery Regiment[67]
  - 333rd Field Artillery Battalion
  - 349th Field Artillery Battalion
  - 350th Field Artillery Battalion
  - 351st Field Artillery Battalion
  - 353rd Field Artillery Battalion
  - 578th Field Artillery Battalion
  - 593rd Field Artillery Battalion
  - 594th Field Artillery Battalion
  - 595th Field Artillery Battalion
  - 596th Field Artillery Battalion
  - 597th Field Artillery Battalion
  - 598th Field Artillery Battalion
  - 599th Field Artillery Battalion
  - 600th Field Artillery Battalion
  - 686th Field Artillery Battalion
  - 777th Field Artillery Battalion
  - 795th Field Artillery Battalion
  - 930th Field Artillery Battalion, Illinois National Guard
  - 931st Field Artillery Battalion, Illinois National Guard
  - 969th Field Artillery Battalion
  - 971st Field Artillery Battalion
  - 973rd Field Artillery Battalion
  - 993rd Field Artillery Battalion
  - 999th Field Artillery Battalion
- Tank Destroyer Units
  - 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion
  - 646th Tank Destroyer Battalion
  - 649th Tank Destroyer Battalion
  - 659th Tank Destroyer Battalion
  - 669th Tank Destroyer Battalion
  - 679th Tank Destroyer Battalion
  - 795th Tank Destroyer Battalion
  - 827th Tank Destroyer Battalion
  - 828th Tank Destroyer Battalion
  - 829th Tank Destroyer Battalion
  - 846th Tank Destroyer Battalion

**Army Air Corps:**

- 332nd Fighter Group (Tuskegee Airmen)

Several Tuskegee airmen at Ramitelli, Italy, March 1945

12th Armored Division soldier with German prisoners of war, April 1945

Americans captured during the Battle of the Bulge, December 1944

**USN**

- 34th Naval Construction Battalion
- 80th Naval Construction Battalion
- 15 USN Special Construction Battalions (stevedore) were segregated.
  - 17th Special Naval Construction Battalion

**United States Marine Corps**

- 51st Defense Battalion
- 52nd Defense Battalion
- 63 USMC Depot and Ammunition Companies were segregated.
  - 16th Marine Field Depot

In February 1942 CNO Admiral Harold Rainsford Stark recommended African Americans for ratings in the construction trades. In April the Navy announced it would enlist African Americans in the Seabees. Even so, there were just two regular CBs that were segregated units, the 34th[68] and 80th[69] NCBs. Both had white Southern officers and black enlisted. Both battalions experienced problems with that arrangement that led to the replacement of the officers. The Navy had a huge need for cargo handlers.[70] The lack of stevedores for unloading ships in combat zones was creating a problem. On 18 September 1942 authorization was granted for the formation of a different type of CB denoted by the tag "Special" for cargo handling.[70] By war's end 41 Special Construction Battalions were commissioned of which 15 were segregated. Those Special CBs later became the first fully integrated units in the U.S. Navy.[71] The wars end also brought the decommissioning of every one of those units.

African-American soldiers in Burma stop work briefly to read President Truman's Proclamation of Victory in Europe, May 9, 1945

Unarmed combat training Marine Corps Base Montford Point. (NARA)

Of note were the actions of the 17th Special Naval Construction Battalion and the 16th Marine Field Depot on Peleliu, September 15–18, 1944. On D-Day the 7th Marines were in a situation where there were not enough of them to man the lines and get the wounded to safety. Coming to their aid were the two companies of the 16 Marine Field Depot(segregated) and the 17th Special Seabee (segregated). That night the Japanese mounted a counter-attack at 0200 hours. The Field Depot Marines are recorded as again having humped ammunition, to the front lines on the stretchers they brought the wounded back on and picked up rifles to become infantrymen. By the time it was over nearly the entire 17th CB had volunteered alongside them. The Seabee record states that besides humping ammo and helping wounded they volunteered to man the line where the wounded had been, man 37mm that had lost their crews and volunteered for anything dangerous. The 17th remained with the 7th Marines until the right flank had been secured D-plus 3.[72][73][74][75][76][77] According to the Military History Encyclopedia on the Web, were it not for the "Black Marine shore party personal" the counterattack on the 7th Marines would not have been repulsed.[78]

"17th Special" Seabees with the 7th Marines on Peleliu made national news in an official U.S. Navy press release.[57] NARA-532537

- On Peleliu, the white shore party detachments from the 33rd and 73rd CBs received Presidential Unit Citations along with the primary shore party, 1st Marine Pioneers.[79] The Commander of the 17th Special CB (segregated) received the same commendatory letter as the Company Commanders of the 7th Marine Ammo Co. (segregated) and the 11th Marine Depot Co.(segregated). Before the battle was even over, Major General Rupertus USMC wrote to each that: "THE NEGRO RACE CAN WELL BE PROUD OF THE WORK PREFORMED [by the 11th Marine Depot Company/ 7th Marine Ammunition Company/ 17th CB]. THE WHOLEHEARTED CO-OPERATION AND UNTIRING EFFORTS WHICH DEMONSTRATED IN EVERY RESPECT THAT THEY APPRECIATED THE PRIVILEGE OF WEARING A MARINE UNIFORM AND SERVING WITH THE MARINES IN COMBAT. PLEASE CONVEY TO YOUR COMMAND THESE SENTIMENTS AND INFORM THEM THAT IN THE EYES OF THE ENTIRE DIVISION THEY HAVE EARNED A "WELL DONE"."[80][81] The Department of the Navy made an official press release of a copy of the 17th CB's "Well Done" letter on November 28, 1944.[82]
- African American Seabees[83][84]

D-Day, Peleliu, African Americans of one of the two segregated units that supported the 7th Marines – the 16th Marine Field Depot or the 17th Naval Construction Battalion Special take a break in the 115=degree heat, September 15, 1944 – NARA - 532535

## Medal of Honor recipients

On January 13, 1997, President Bill Clinton, in a White House ceremony, awarded the nation's highest military honor—the Medal of Honor—to seven African-American servicemen who had served in World War II.[85]

The only living recipient was First Lieutenant Vernon Baker.

The posthumous recipients were:

- Major Charles L. Thomas
- First Lieutenant John R. Fox
- Staff Sergeant Ruben Rivers
- Staff Sergeant Edward A. Carter, Jr. Carter also has a Military Sealift Command vessel named after him.
- Private First Class Willy F. James, Jr.
- Private George Watson

## Blue discharges

African-American troops faced discrimination in the form of the disproportionate issuance of blue discharges. The blue discharge (also called a "blue ticket") was a form of administrative discharge created in 1916 to replace two previous discharge classifications, the administrative discharge without honor and the "unclassified" discharge. It was neither honorable nor dishonorable.[86] Of the 48,603 blue discharges issued by the Army between December 1, 1941, and June 30, 1945, 10,806 were issued to African Americans. This accounts for 22.2% of all blue discharges, when African Americans made up 6.5% of the Army in that time frame.[87] Blue discharge recipients frequently faced difficulties obtaining employment[88] and were routinely denied the benefits of the G. I. Bill by the Veterans Administration (VA).[89] In October 1945, Black-interest newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier* launched a crusade against the discharge and its abuses. Calling the discharge "a vicious instrument that should not be perpetrated against the American Soldier", the *Courier* rebuked the Army for "allowing prejudiced officers to use it as a means of punishing Negro soldiers who do not like specifically unbearable conditions". The *Courier* printed instructions on how to appeal a blue discharge and warned its readers not to quickly accept a blue ticket out of the service because of the negative effect it would likely have on their lives.[90]

The House Committee on Military Affairs held hearings in response to the press crusade, issuing a report in 1946 that sharply criticized its use and the VA for discriminating against blue discharge holders.[91] Congress discontinued the blue discharge in 1947,[92] but the VA continued its practice of denying G. I. Bill benefits to blue-tickets.[89]

# Integration of the armed forces

On July 26, 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981 integrating the military and mandating equality of treatment and opportunity. It also made it illegal, per military law, to make a racist remark. Desegregation of the military was not complete for several years, and all-black Army units persisted well into the Korean War. The last all-black unit was not disbanded until 1954.

In 1950, Lieutenant Leon Gilbert of the still-segregated 24th Infantry Regiment was court martialed and sentenced to death for refusing to obey the orders of a white officer while serving in the Korean War. Gilbert maintained that the orders would have meant certain death for himself and the men in his command. The case led to worldwide protests and increased attention to segregation and racism in the U.S. military. Gilbert's sentence was commuted to twenty and later seventeen years of imprisonment; he served five years and was released.

The integration commanded by Truman's 1948 Executive Order extended to schools and neighborhoods as well as military units. Fifteen years after the Executive Order, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara issued Department of Defense Directive 5120.36. "Every military commander", the Directive mandates, "has the responsibility to oppose discriminatory practices affecting his men and their dependents and to foster equal opportunity for them, not only in areas under his immediate control, but also in nearby communities where they may gather in off-duty hours."[93] While the directive was issued in 1963, it was not until 1967 that the first non-military establishment was declared off-limits. In 1970 the requirement that commanding officers first obtain permission from the Secretary of Defense was lifted, and areas were allowed to be declared housing areas off limits to military personnel by their commanding officer.[94]

Since the end of military segregation and the creation of an all-volunteer army, the American military saw the representation of African Americans in its ranks rise precipitously.[95]

# Korean War

Jesse L. Brown became the U.S. Navy's first black aviator in October 1948. He died when his plane was shot down during the Battle of Chosin Reservoir in North Korea. He was unable to parachute from his crippled F4U Corsair and crash-landed successfully. His injuries and damage to his aircraft prevented him from leaving the plane. A white squadron mate, Thomas Hudner, crash-landed his F4U Corsair near Brown and attempted to extricate Brown but could not and Brown died of his injuries. Hudner was awarded the Medal of Honor for his efforts. The U.S. Navy honored Jesse Brown by naming a frigate after him—the USS *Jesse L. Brown (FF-1089)*.[96]

African-American prisoners of war in Korea in 1950.

Two enlisted men from the 24th Infantry Regiment (still a segregated unit), Cornelius H. Charlton and William Thompson, posthumously received the Medal of Honor for actions during the war.

# Vietnam War

The Vietnam War saw many great accomplishments by many African Americans, including twenty who received the Medal of Honor for their actions. African Americans were over-represented in hazardous duty and combat roles during the conflict, and suffered disproportionately higher casualty rates. Civil-rights leaders protested this disparity during the early years of the war, prompting reforms that were implemented in 1967–68 resulting in the casualty rate dropping to slightly higher than their percentage of the total population.[97][98][99][100]

A U.S. soldier of 1st Battalion, 503rd U.S. Infantry battles for Hill 882, southwest of Dak To, November 1967

In 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson presented the Medal of Honor to U.S. Army Specialist Five Lawrence Joel, for a "very special kind of courage—the unarmed heroism of compassion and service to others." Joel was the first living African American to receive the Medal of Honor since the Mexican–American War. He was a medic who in 1965 saved the lives of U.S. troops under ambush in Vietnam and defied direct orders to stay to the ground, walking through Viet Cong gunfire and tending to the troops despite being shot twice himself. The Lawrence Joel Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, is dedicated to his honor.[101]

On August 21, 1968, with the posthumous award of the Medal of Honor, U.S. Marine James Anderson, Jr. became the first African-American U.S. Marine recipient of the Medal of Honor for his heroic actions and sacrifice of life.

On December 10, 1968, U.S. Army Captain Riley Leroy Pitts became the first African-American commissioned officer to be awarded the Medal of Honor. His medal was presented posthumously to his wife, Eula Pitts, by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Three out of the 21 African-American Medal of Honor recipients who served in Vietnam were members of the 5th Special Forces Group otherwise known as The Green Berets. These men are as follows: Sergeant First Class Melvin Morris, SFC. Eugene Ashley, Jr., and SFC. William Maud Bryant.

Melvin Morris received the Medal of Honor 44 years after the action in which he earned the Distinguished Service Cross. Sergeant Ashley's medal was posthumously awarded to his family at the White House by Vice President Spiro T. Agnew on December 2, 1969.

# Post-Vietnam to present day

In 1989, President George H. W. Bush appointed Army General Colin Powell to the position of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, making Powell the highest-ranking officer in the United States military. Powell was the first, and is so far the only, African American to hold that position. The Chairman serves as the chief military adviser to the President and the Secretary of Defense. During his tenure Powell oversaw the 1989 United States invasion of Panama to oust General Manuel Noriega and the 1990 to 1991 Gulf War against Iraq. General Powell's four-year term as Chairman ended in 1993.

General Colin Powell briefs President George H. W. Bush and his advisors on the progress of the Gulf War

General William E. "Kip" Ward was officially nominated as the first commander of the new United States Africa Command on July 10, 2007 and assumed command on October 1, 2007.

The previous Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, Carlton W. Kent, is African-American; as were the previous two before him. Current Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, Ronald L. Green is also African-American.

On January 20, 2009, Barack Obama was inaugurated as President of the United States, making him *ex officio* the first African-American Commander-in-Chief of the United States Armed Forces.

# Military history of African Americans in popular culture

The following is a list of notable African-American military members or units in popular culture.

Play media

Tuskegee Airmen were featured in *Wings for This Man* (1945)

| Release Date (or Year) | Name (or event) | Notability | Reference |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1944 | *The Negro Soldier* | a Frank Capra recruitment documentary | [102] |
| 1945 | *Wings for This Man* | a "propaganda" short about the Tuskegee Airmen was produced by the First Motion Picture Unit of the Army Air Forces. The film was narrated by Ronald Reagan. | [103] |
| 1972 | *DC Comics* | John Stewart of the Green Lanterns was created as an African-American Marine | |
| 1984 | *A Soldier's Story* | a 1984 drama film directed by Norman Jewison, based upon Charles Fuller's Pulitzer Prize-winning Off Broadway production *A Soldier's Play*. A black officer is sent to investigate the murder of a black sergeant in Louisiana near the end of World War II. | [104] |
| 1989 | *Glory* | film featuring the 54th Union regiment composed of African-American soldiers. Starring Denzel Washington and Matthew Broderick | |
| 1990 | *The Court-Martial of Jackie Robinson* | A film about the early life of the baseball star in the army, particularly his court-martial for insubordination regarding segregation. | |
| January 31, 1992 | *Family Matters* ABC TV series | In the episode entitled "Brown Bombshell", Estelle (portrayed by actress Rosetta LeNoire) is determined to share the stories of her late fighter-pilot husband and World War II's Tuskegee Airmen to an uninterested Winslow clan. Eventually, she is invited to share her stories to Eddie's American history class. | [105] |
| 1996 | *The Tuskegee Airmen* | Produced and aired by HBO and starring Laurence Fishburne. | [106] |
| 1997 | G.I. Joe action figure series | The Tuskegee Airmen are represented. | [107] |
| 1999 | *Mutiny* | TV made film of the 1944 Port Chicago disaster | |
| 2001 | *The Wild Blue: The Men and Boys who Flew the B-24s over Germany* | Book by Stephen Ambrose in which the Tuskegee Airmen are mentioned and honored. | [108] |
| 2001–2005 | *JAG* | The Commander Peter Ulysses Sturgis Turner (played by Scott Lawrence) is an African-American Navy Officer in the JAG TV series. Former submarine officer, he serves now as lawyer in JAG | |
| 2002 | *JAG: "Port Chicago"* | The television drama features the incident | |
| 2002 | *Hart's War* | a film about a World War II prisoner of war (POW) based on the novel by John Katzenbach | |
| 2004 | *Silver Wings and Civil Rights: The Fight to Fly* | this documentary was the first film to feature information regarding the "Freeman Field Mutiny", the struggle of 101 African-American officers arrested for entering a white officers' club. | [109] |
| 2005 | *Willy's Cut & Shine* | a play by Michael Bradford depicting African-American World War II soldiers and the troubles they encounter upon returning home to the Deep South. | [110] |
| 2008 | *Miracle at St. Anna* | Italian epic war film set primarily in Italy during German-occupied Europe in World War II. Directed by Spike Lee, | [111] |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | the film is based on the eponymous 2003 novel by James McBride, who also wrote the screenplay. | |
| 2009 | *Fly* | a play about the Tuskegee Airmen | [112] |
| 2010 | *For Love of Liberty* | a PBS documentary television series that portrays African-American servicemen and women and their dedicated allegiance to the United States military. | [113] |
| 2012 | *Red Tails* | George Lucas announced he was planning a film about the Tuskegee Airmen. In his release Lucas says, "They were the only escort fighters during the war that never lost a bomber so they were, like, the best." | [114] |

# See also

- African-American mutinies in the United States Armed Forces
- Afro-Asian
- Military history of the United States
- United States Colored Troops
- List of African American Medal of Honor recipients
- Frederick C. Branch
- Benjamin O. Davis
- Martin Delany
- Daniel "Chappie" James, Jr.
- National Association for Black Veterans
- List of African-American astronauts
- African-American discrimination in the U.S. Military
- Racial segregation in the United States Armed Forces

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